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WEST GERMANY

Spies with Many Secrets

Bonn owns up to the biggest espionage loss since World War II

When West German counterintelligence agents swooped down on 16 East German spy suspects one night 18 months ago, the mass roundup was cheered as evidence that Bonn had finally found ways to ferret out the myriad espionage agents in its midst and plug the embarrassing flow of government secrets to the East. The cheers, it now appears, were premature. Last week the highly regarded Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung revealed contents of a secret Defense Ministry evaluation showing that Communist spying had been far more compromising to West German armed forces—and NATO—than anyone had previously imagined. Specifically, the government document revealed that among the 16 suspects was a trio of former Defense Ministry employees in Bonn who over a period of six years had smuggled photocopies of no less than 1,000 sensitive documents to East Germany.

By the estimate of Chief Federal Prosecutor Kurt Rebmann, that haul was the most damaging espionage case since World War II. In terms of military intelligence, he said, it surpassed even the work of Günter Guillaume, former Chancellor Willy Brandt's personal aide, whose arrest three years ago as an East German agent moved Brandt to resign. The key figure in the trio appeared to be a stunning brunette, Renate Lutze, 37, who from 1972 until her arrest was chief secretary to the head of the Defense Ministry's personnel and welfare section; for reasons not yet fully explained, that job gave her access to information on nuclear weapons storage locations and mobilization plans. Her husband, Lothar-Erwin Lutze, 37, who worked as an official in the ministry's weapons section, recruited both his wife and the third member of the trio, Jürgen Wiegel, 32, into the espionage ring. Wiegel, so far the only one to admit his guilt, was employed as a clerk in the ministry's naval staff.

The full significance of the Lutze case became clear to West German investigators only gradually, in the course of countless interrogations of the suspects. But officials are now convinced that the three passed on, among other items, secrets pertaining to the West German army's contingency plans in case of war with the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, ammunition distribution plans, NATO and Bundeswehr analyses of the Pact's strengths and weaknesses, and plans for development of a new generation of West German tanks scheduled to replace the current Leopard models in the 1980s.

Almost more astonishing than the loss of such intelligence was the fact that the news caught so many high government officials by surprise.

prepared the report more than a year ago, lamely admitted that he had not got around to reading it and that indeed the Frankfurter Allgemeine article had "actually enlightened me." Chancellor Helmut Schmidt also denied having known the extent of the Lutze case. With irrefutable if infuriating logic, his spokesman argued: "How could the Chancellor know more than Leber?" As the initial shock sunk in, the spy affair rapidly turned political. Opposition Leader Helmut Kohl demanded Leber's resignation and charged that Schmidt also "bears responsibility."



Defense Minister Georg Leber

Flatly refusing to step down, Leber called for an official investigation and accepted the temporary suspension of Herbert Laabs, the department head for whom Lutze worked. The federal prosecutor's office suggested that Laabs may be guilty of failing to enforce security procedures. Furthermore, though the Defense Minister admitted that he failed to realize the extent of the Lutze case, he said NATO officials in Brussels were immediately informed. They were thus able to "take the necessary steps" to alter strategy and minimize the damage from the leaks, Leber said.

But at NATO headquarters in Brussels, NATO brass said that the early warnings concerned merely "potential breaches of security" and Bonn's confirmation had taken much longer. The latest list of compromised secrets was handed over to NATO by the Germans only a few weeks ago. Though some planners have suggested that NATO limit the flow of confidential information to West Germany, most alliance officials disagree. Given West Germany's importance and frontline position in the alliance, they insist, it is impossible to screen either Bonn's Defense Ministry or the Bundeswehr from military secrets. Somewhat defensively, West German military men contend that much of the classified information spirited away, including specific alert systems and mobilization plans for the Bundeswehr, would have been altered anyway as part of routine procedure. Other military secrets, they say, such as the location of fuel reserves and weapons depots, can be obtained by the East bloc through satellite and conventional aerial observations. But NATO officials did not shrug off the Lutze espionage take so easily. They fear that the alliance's defense capacity—and especially the effectiveness of permanent facilities on its front line—might have suffered irreparable damage. Worse, they fear more revelations to come.



Accused Communist Agents Leber, Erwin and Renate Lutze, in 1975